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ABSTRACT

Self-concept formation has long been considered the most significant developmental milestone of adolescence. To assess the effects of gender, race, and social class on the general and area-specific self-esteem of late adolescents, 195 eleventh grade students, divided according gender, race (black, white), and social class (low, middle, high) were tested. Subjects completed the Rosenberg General Self-Esteem Scale, the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale, and the Brookover Self-Concept of Ability and School Achievement Test. An analysis of the results showed that females, whites, and lower social class adolescents were consistently lower in their self-esteem scores than were males, blacks, and upper social class teenagers. White females were found to be lower in general and happiness self-esteem than all other gender by race subgroups. High socioeconomic status white students were lower on the happiness and behavioral self-esteem measures than black students and white middle class students. Black males and white females were less confident in their school ability than were black females and white males. The study is seen as an initial empirical contribution to the development of a comprehensive model of adolescent self-esteem. (Author/BL)

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GENERAL AND SPECIFIC SELF-ESTEEM IN LATE ADOLESCENT STUDENTS: RACE X GENDER X SES EFFECTS

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ABSTRACT

The present study assessed the effects of gender, race and social class on the general and area-specific self-esteem of high school students. One hundred and ninety-five high school students served as subjects in a 2 (gender: male, female) x 2 (race; black white) x 3 (social class; low, middle and high) factorial design. The Rosenberg General Self-Esteem, Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept and the Brookover Self Concept of Ability and School Achievement Test were the measures of either general or specific self-esteem. Females, whites and lower social class adolescents were consistently lower in their self-esteem scores than were males, blacks and upper social class teenagers, respectively. White females were found to be lower in general and happiness self-esteem than all other gender by race subgroups. High SES white students were lower on the happiness and behavior self-esteem measures than black students and white middle class students. Black males and white females were less confident in their school ability than were black females and white males.

Self-esteem has been conceptualized as the evaluative component of the self-concept and refers to one's feelings of self-worth (Coopersmith, 1967). It is multidimensional and reflects the overall feelings of self-worth, referred to as global or general self-esteem (Rosenberg & Simmons, 1972). This general feeling of self-worth is derived from an integration of feelings in specific areas of competency. These areas are referred to as area-specific self-esteem and include self-worth as it relates to our behaviors, physical appearance, intelligence, social and emotional selves. Although one might expect a relationship between area-specific and general self-esteem, it is possible for individuals to vary in their levels of area-specific self-esteem. Consequently, one can not assume that factors related to differences in general self-esteem will also significantly affect area-specific self-esteem.

Self-concept formation has long been considered the most significant developmental milestone of adolescence. People with high general self-esteem typically function in an effective manner in a variety of situations and perceive themselves as fulfilled and happy (see Coopersmith, 1967). Thus, focusing on the nature of the adolescent's self-esteem is a way of monitoring healthy self-concept formation. The early adolescent must adjust to conflicts regarding physical appearance, peer acceptance and emerging sexuality. In contrast, the late adolescent must resolve conflicts regarding independence, sexuality, morality and vocational choice or career aspiration. In our society high school graduation is a symbol of

adulthood; a time when most people leave the family nest, obtain full-time employment and/or continue their education. A positive self-image is necessary for the late adolescent to cope with the stress created during this transitional period (Purkey & Novak, 1984).

The general self-esteem of young and preadolescent children has been studied extensively (Cicirelli, 1977; Lamke, 1982; Powell & Fuller, 1973; Simmons & Rosenberg, 1975), however, there are fewer studies that focus on the late adolescent. Those that do have measured factors such as self-concept stability (O'Malley & Bachman, 1983; Rubin, 1978), desegregation effects (Williams & Byars, 1970) or self-concept of school ability (Johnsen & Medley, 1978; O'Malley & Bachman, 1979) with a few studies measuring gender differences in self-esteem as a secondary focus (O'Malley & Bachman, 1979).

The effects of gender, race, and social class on general self-esteem have been investigated for varied age groups. The general self-esteem of preadolescent and early adolescent girls was found to be lower than that of boys of the same age (Hare, 1980; Simmons, Brown, Bush & Blyth, 1978; Simmons & Rosenberg, 1975). Similar findings were reported by O'Malley and Bachman (1979) for male and female high school students and by Conger, Peng and Dunteman (1977) who conducted a longitudinal study of self-esteem, locus of control, and life goals of high school students.

Social class effects have also been found for early adolescents. The academic (Hare, 1977) and general self-esteem of low SES adolescents were found to be lower than the self-evaluations of

middle SES students (Fu, Hinkle & Korslund 1983; Hare, 1977; Kennedy, 1975). In addition, Gray-Little and Applebaum (1979) found a positive correlation between general self-esteem and father's education for 7th and 10th graders. Similar data is not available for late adolescents.

Previous reports regarding racial differences in self-esteem have been inconsistent. Prior to the 1970s researchers reported white children to be higher in general self-esteem than black children (Long & Henderson, 1968; Richmond & White, 1971). However, since the mid-1970s black children were reported as having higher self-esteem than whites (Epps, 1975; Rosenberg & Simmons, 1975; Simmons, 1978; Simmons, et al., 1978). In addition, Busk, Ford and Schulman (1973) and Hare (1977) found no racial differences on their general self-esteem measures, although Hare (1977) did report that the school self-esteem of white children was higher than that of black children. Most of these findings refer to elementary children and not late adolescents. Also, excluding the work of Hare (1977), many investigators measured racial differences in self-esteem with no control for social class.

The general self-esteem of girls and low SES children has been consistently reported as lower than that of boys and middle class preadolescents, early adolescents and elementary children. Thus, it is reasonable to expect similar findings for the late adolescent. The implications from the most recent research regarding racial differences in self-esteem are that black late adolescents will

either be equal to or higher in general self-esteem than their white counterparts. Area-specific self-esteem has not been assessed for late adolescents; however, from research on preadolescent area-specific self-esteem, one might expect white adolescents to have higher school self-esteem than black students. In order to fill a void in the literature, the focus of this paper is to assess the effects of gender, race and social class on the general and area-specific self-esteem of late adolescents.

METHOD

Subjects

The subjects were 195 , eleventh grade students from three public high schools in North Carolina. The students were 16 years old (mean age = 16.2 years).

In the present study social class was defined in terms of mean parental education. Although parental education is generally not the only criterion used to define social class it was our most reliable estimate and has been used as the primary indicant of social class by others (Kaplan, 1976, 1978a, 1978b; Rosenberg & Rosenberg, 1978). The social class levels (SES) were designated as follows: low - less than 12 years schooling, middle - 12 years of schooling, and high - greater than 12 years of schooling. Based on this classification system, 31% of the present sample were low social class, 37% middle social class and 32% high social class. The sample was 48% female and 52% male, 75% black and 25% white.

Procedures

All students were group tested in their respective schools. Testing required 130 minutes with two 10-minute breaks scheduled 45 and 90 minutes into the session. Each test question was read aloud twice by a test administrator. Four test monitors were also present during the session to answer questions pertaining to the tests. A biographical index was administered prior to the administration of the test battery.

Measures

There were two measures of general self-esteem: the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965), a 10-item Likert type scale, and the total score calculated from the Piers-Harris Children's Self Concept Scale (Piers, 1969). Area-specific self-esteem was assessed by the Piers-Harris Children's Self Concept Scale (PSCS). The PSCS yields six specific factor scores which describe the subjects' self-esteem in terms of their behavior, intellectual and school status, physical appearance and attributes, anxiety, popularity, and happiness and satisfaction. All factors are scored such that the higher the score the more positive the attribute (e.g., a high anxiety score indicates a low anxiety level). The Brookover Self-Concept of Ability and School Achievement (Brookover, LePere, Hammacher, & Erickson, 1965) also provided another area-specific measure of school self-esteem. This self-concept of academic ability score is based on eight multiple choice items which focus on general school abilities.

RESULTS

General Self-Esteem

To identify general self-esteem differences as a function of gender, race and SES, 2 (gender) x 2 (race) x 3 (SES) analyses of variance were performed on scores derived from the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale and the total score from the PSCS. When applicable Duncan Multiple Range Tests were used to assess subgroup differences and reported at the .05 rejection level. Table 1 presents the mean self-esteem scores and probability levels as a function of gender, race, and SES.

Insert Table 1 about here

A significant main effect of race was found for the Rosenberg, $F(1,183) = 14.54$, $p < .001$, and the total score from the PSCS, $F(1,183) = 18.44$, $p < .001$. The white students had lower self-esteem scores than the black students. In addition there was a significant gender x race interaction on the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, $F(1,183) = 6.70$, $p < .01$. White females were significantly lower in general self-esteem than white males and black males and females. Table 2 presents the gender x race means for the Rosenberg, PSCS Happiness and Brookover measures.

Insert Table 2 about here

A significant main effect of SES was found for the Rosenberg, $F(2,183) = 7.39$, $p < .001$. Low SES students had lower general self-esteem scores than the middle or high SES students. The 2 (gender) x 2 (race) x 3 (SES) ANOVA on the total PSCS score mirrored the results obtained with the Rosenberg. The SES factor was statistically significant, $F(2,183) = 5.73$, $p < .01$, with low SES subjects again demonstrating lower general self-esteem than middle and high SES subjects.

Specific Self-Esteem

Three-way ANOVAs (gender x race x SES) with the PSCS factor scores and the general score from the Brookover Scale as the dependent variable were calculated. Race effects were found for all PSCS factors (see Table 1). Black students expressed themselves as being happier, more popular and attractive, better behaved, more intellectually competent and less anxious than their white counterparts.

A gender effect was found for the Anxiety, $F(1,183) = 10.97$, $p < .001$, and Popularity, $F(1,183) = 5.43$, $p < .05$, factors. Male students were significantly less anxious and held more positive attitudes about their popularity than the females. Female students had more positive attitudes toward their school ability as measured by the Brookover, $F(1, 183) = 4.87$, $p < .05$. In addition, significant race x gender interactions were found for the PSCS Happiness, $F(1,183) = 7.52$, $p < .01$, and the Brookover school ability measures, $F(1,183) = 7.19$, $p < .01$. The white females were less happy than the white males and the black males and females. The Brookover interaction indicated that white females were less confident of their school ability than were white males and black females. Black

males were the least confident subjects (see Table 2).

Table 3 presents the race x SES means for the PSCS Happiness and Behavior Scales. A significant main effect of SES was found for the PSCS factors of Behavior, $F(2,183) = 3.21$, $p < .05$,

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Insert Table 3 about here

Intelligence/School, $F(2,183) = 11.40$, $p < .001$, and Anxiety, $F(2, 183) = 5.50$, $p < .01$. In each instance the middle and high SES students had higher self-esteem scores than the low SES students. The race x SES interactions for the PSCS Happiness and Behavior factors were significant, $F(2, 183) = 3.14$ and $F(2,183) = 3.06$, $ps < .05$, respectively. High SES white students had lower happiness and behavior scores than black students and middle SES white students. Low SES white students were similar in behavior to high SES white students although the former scored higher than the latter subjects on the Happiness scale.

Finally, 2 (race) x 2 (gender) ANCOVAs with SES as the covariate were calculated on all of the self-esteem scores to correct for the possible confounding of race and SES. The results from these two-way analyses were similar to the findings reported thusfar. All race effects found for the ANOVAs remained significant in the ANCOVAs.

DISCUSSION

With the exception of the Brookover scale, black students were significantly higher than white students on all general and area-specific self-esteem measures. This finding is consistent with reports by Epps (1975) and Simmons et al. (1978) but contradicts Clark and Clark (1950), Goodman (1952) and Moreland (1958). Simmons (1978) suggested that the studies performed during the 50's relied on preschool subjects and projective tests that assumed to measure self-esteem; whereas, more recent studies used older children as subjects and objective tests. The present study included adolescent subjects and objective tests.

Suggestions abound as to why black students have higher general self-esteem than white students. McDill, Meyers, and Rigsby (1966) suggested that the high self-esteem of black students is a defense mechanism against discrimination; a conclusion countered by Hare (1977). Epps (1975) and Hare (1977) suggested that the academic achievement of white students is of primary importance in the development of self-esteem; whereas, school constitutes a relatively small aspect of the self-evaluation for black and low SES students. Hare (1977) contended that values such as "street wiseness" and the ability to assume adult roles at a young age strongly contribute to black children's self-worth. Hare's (1977) explanation is consistent with the present findings since the Brookover School measure was the only scale that failed to reveal higher self-esteem scores for black relative to white high school students. Powell and Fuller (1973) suggested that the rise in black self-esteem during the 70's was due to the black militancy movement. Their study of the effects of school desegregation

on the self-concept of southern children supports the racial differences in general self-esteem found in the present research. Simmons et al. (1978) suggested that higher self-esteem scores for black versus white students may have been due to the fact that the samples consisted of inner-city preadolescent subjects. However, since the present sample was southern, it appears that geographic region may not be related to racial differences in self-esteem.

The findings that female and low SES students were lower in self-esteem than male and upper SES students, respectively, replicates previous research with younger children (Fu et al., 1983; Hare, 1980; Maruyama, Rubin & Kingsbury, 1981; Simmons et al., 1978).

The main effects of gender, race and SES are best interpreted in terms of the gender by race and race by SES interactions. White females were lower on the Rosenberg General Self-Esteem and the PSCS Happiness scales than males and black females, respectively. Furthermore, high SES white students were lower on the PSCS Happiness measure than all other race by SES subgroups. With the exception of low SES white students, the high SES white students were lower than black and middle SES white students on the PSCS Behavior scale.

There are several, albeit speculative, explanations for these findings. High SES white females are typically high academic achievers (see Bentzen, 1963; Tyler, 1947). However, high academic achievement may negatively effect the female's social life. Their academic abilities may interfere with their popularity, especially with boys. Consequently, the academically oriented female may perceive her achievements as a

barrier to her social status and may begin to view herself in a less positive manner.

Research investigating sex differences in achievement behavior has shown that females have greater affiliation needs than males (Crandall, 1964; Crandall, Dewey, Katkovsky & Preston, 1964), and thus high achieving females experience more conflict between the achievement and affiliation needs. According to Hoffman (1972) anxiety results from conflict between affiliation and achievement needs. Hoffman (1972) also suggested that in elementary school, achievement is rewarded by parents, teachers and peers. However, the reinforcing value of achievement behaviors decreases with age for females. Adolescents become more influential in controlling peer behavior and high achieving females may be viewed as a threat by many males. Thus, the conflict between achievement and affiliation needs becomes stronger as the high achieving females attempt to adjust to inconsistent feedback from the environment. Williams (1977) asserts that as girls move through adolescence they experience more pressure to conform to a feminine image and focus on mate selection. In addition, she hypothesized that middle class girls are socialized to value competence, skill mastery and educational achievement, which increases their tendency to be high achieving. However, Williams (1977) pointed out that high achieving females experience a paradox "because the feminine image does not include the display of intelligence, competence, and skill mastery, nor is it compatible with the high-level academic or vocational

achievement" (p. 185). Thus the conflict produces anxiety and/or avoidance which can ultimately lower self-esteem.

High SES females may feel they are faced with numerous goals where the standards set by peers, parents and self are extremely high. Inevitably, high SES females fall short of one or more of these goals; and, as a result devalue themselves. Carver and Ganellen (1983) add support to this hypothesis by showing that high SES females tend to overgeneralize a single failure which results in an increase in self-punitiveness, i.e. a lowering of general self-esteem.

The difference between the self-esteem of high SES females and that of males and low SES females may be related to different sex-role orientations. Lamke (1982) showed that positive self-esteem was related to masculinity in both males and females. This may be due to the high value our culture places on masculine behaviors such as assertiveness and the tendency to devalue feminine behaviors such as gentleness. Spence and Helmreich (1978) found no SES differences in the femininity scores of female high school students. High SES females were similar to lower class females in sex-role orientation. High SES females must also adjust to internal conflicts because task achieving behaviors are associated with the male sex-role stereotype. Thus they may have lower self-esteem because of a greater discrepancy in sex-role attitudes and expected behaviors.

CONCLUSIONS

The research on adolescent self-esteem has not dealt systematically with the interactive effects of gender, race and social class. These factors must be addressed if a comprehensive theory of adolescent general and area specific self-esteem is to emerge. The present study is viewed as an initial empirical contribution to the development of a comprehensive model of adolescent self-esteem.

In general, high SES females were lower on several measures of area-specific self-esteem than other gender by SES groups. Furthermore, white females were lower in general self-esteem than were black students and white males.

Carver and Ganellen (1983) found that young women overgeneralize a specific failure and express their perceived inadequacies in self-punitive behaviors. In the present study, the low self-esteem expressed by high SES white females may represent their tendency to overgeneralize perceived failures. It is assumed that these students perceive themselves as being under great pressure to excell in all their pursuits, e.g., academics, physical attractiveness, social, etc. Based on the Carver and Ganellen (1983) study, if high SES females perceive failure in any one of these areas they will doubt their abilities in all other areas, resulting in a loss of self-esteem and feelings

of inadequacy. The preadolescent experiences of these students may be contrasted with males and lower SES females. For example, males and lower SES females typically engage in behaviors which permit them to experience failure prior to adolescence. This conditioning "toughens the ego" so that the inevitable academic, athletic or social failures during adolescence are not as traumatic for them as they are for high SES females.

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Table 1

Mean Self-Esteem Scores and F Values by Gender, Race, and SES

	Gender			Race			SES			
	Female	Male	F	Black	White	F	High	Medium	Low	F
Rosenberg	33.6	34.2	0.43	34.5	32.2	14.54***	34.8	34.4	32.5	7.39***
Piers-Harris	60.9	63.5	1.62	64.0	56.9	18.44***	64.2	63.5	58.9	5.73**
Behavior	13.9	13.6	2.40	14.1	12.6	16.41***	14.0	14.0	13.1	3.21*
Happiness	9.0	9.3	1.10	9.3	8.7	6.73**	8.9	9.3	9.1	0.87
Anxiety	9.3	10.8	10.99***	10.5	8.7	14.45***	10.6	10.5	9.2	5.50**
Popularity	8.5	9.3	5.43*	9.2	8.3	4.79*	9.3	9.0	8.5	2.56
Appearance	10.1	10.7	2.85	10.7	9.5	8.92**	10.4	10.5	10.3	0.14
School	13.4	13.3	0.29	13.7	12.2	11.18***	14.5	13.5	12.1	11.40***
Brookover	30.6	29.2	4.87*	29.7	30.3	0.10	33.0	29.7	27.1	33.29***
Total N	93	102		147	48		61	71	63	

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

Table 2

Gender x Race Mean Self-Esteem Scores and F Values

	Gender x Race				
	Black		White		
	Females	Males	Females	Males	F
Rosenberg	34.7	34.3	31.2	33.7	6.70*
PSCS Happiness	9.3	9.3	8.2	9.3	7.52*
Brookover	31.0	28.7	29.7	31.2	7.19*
Total N	64	83	29	19	

*$p < .01$.

Table 3

Race x SES Mean Self-Esteem Scores and F Values

	Race x SES						
	Black			White			
PSCS	High	Middle	Low	High	Middle	Low	F
Happiness	9.4	9.3	9.2	8.0	9.2	9.1	3.14*
Behavior	14.9	14.1	13.3	12.1	13.6	12.4	3.06*
Total N	42	60	45	19	11	18	

*$p < .05$

Table 1a

Mean Self-Esteem Scores and F Values by Gender

	Gender			
	Female		Male	F
Rosenberg	33.6	=	34.2	0.43
Piers-Harris	60.9	=	63.5	1.62
Behavior	13.9	=	13.6	2.40
Happiness	9.0	=	9.3	1.10
Anxiety	9.3	<	10.8	10.99**
Popularity	8.5	<	9.3	5.43*
Appearance	10.1	=	10.7	2.85
School	13 4	=	13.3	0.29
Brookover	30.6	<	29.2	4.87*
Total N	93		102	

*$p < .05$. **$p < .001$.

Table 1b

Mean Self-Esteem Scores and F Values by Race

	Race			
	Black		White	F
Rosenberg	34.5	>	32.2	14.54***
Piers-Harris	64.0	>	56.9	18.44***
Behavior	14.1	>	12.6	16.41***
Happiness	9.3	>	8.7	6.73**
Anxiety	10.5	>	8.7	14.45***
Popularity	9.2	>	8.3	4.79*
Appearance	10.7	>	9.5	8.92**
School	13.7	>	12.2	11.18***
Brookover	29.7	=	30.3	0.10
Total N	147		48	

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

Table 1c

Mean Self-Esteem Scores and F Values by SES

	SES					
	High		Medium		Low	F
Rosenberg	34.8	=	34.4	>	32.5	7.39***
Piers-Harris	64.2	=	63.5	>	58.9	5.73**
Behavior	14.0	=	14.0	>	13.1	3.21*
Happiness	8.9	=	9.3	=	9.1	0.87
Anxiety	10.6	=	10.5	>	9.2	5.50**
Popularity	9.3	=	9.0	=	8.5	2.56
Appearance	10.4	=	10.5	=	10.3	0.14
School	14.5	>	13.5	>	12.1	11.40***
Brookover	33.0	>	29.7	>	27.1	33.29***
Total N	61		71		63	

*p < 05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.